**Preservation Assessment Survey:**
**The Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society**
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**Executive Summary**

The Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society operates a small, all-volunteer museum that holds several priceless artifacts for the region. The museum building is very old, and is not conducive to long-term storage for these artifacts due to major lack of climate control mechanisms. While the general consensus among museum staff indicates a need to better organize and preserve the collections, the museum does not currently have the resources to train and compensate staff to do so. Additionally, the board that oversees financial direction for the museum may not always agree with a clear direction for the collections. Our findings indicate that due to these limitations, major preservation projects to protect these historical assets are stalled or completely nonexistent. With the help of a recent bequest - and by establishing a clear direction for the collections into the future - the society can invest in better storage and exhibition environments to preserve its history for the long term.

Major recommendations will include: finding an adequate off-site storage facility for all non-exhibiting collections, implementing policies and procedures to standardize the services and responsibilities of the historical society, hiring graduate student interns to catalog and digitize the collections, and introducing danger preparedness as a museum priority.

**Summary of the Collection**

The Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society (GWBHS) is an all-volunteer historical society and museum that serves the neighboring communities of Keego Harbor, Orchard Lake Village and Apple Island, Sylvan Lake, and the West Bloomfield Township. The society was established to promote the history and heritage of greater West Bloomfield, an area rich with Native American history and later settled by mostly Irish families. Today, the society maintains the GWBHS museum, offers tours of historic Apple Island, and puts on annual history events for the community.

The GWBHS museum building itself - where the majority of the society’s collection is housed - is located in Orchard Lake Village next to Orchard Lake Town Hall. It stands just across the street from Orchard Lake and the historic Apple Island. The GWBHS museum building stands on the site where, in 1854, was built the Orchard Lake House (later, Orchard Lake Hotel). In 1938, this building was razed, the foundation was preserved, and a new building was built on top of the old site. This became Orchard Lake City Hall. In 1987, a new city hall was constructed and the GWBHS was granted use of the old building.

The museum is a very small building with the original 19th century stone foundation basement. Its main level includes three rooms: the museum office, the main exhibit room, and a smaller exhibit room. Artifacts on display to the public are showcased in the two exhibit rooms, while the rest of the collections are kept in the basement and museum office. In addition to the artifacts housed at the museum, the society maintains glass case displays containing regional artifacts and history exhibits located at each of the neighboring town halls.

A Board of Directors (about 9-10 individuals) oversees and determines the financial direction of the GWBHS museum. Buzz Brown, originally Ohio native with a strong interest in the history of the Greater West Bloomfield region, serves as the current president of the society. Two other active museum staff include: Bill McIsaac, the current collections manager, and Susan Williams, the current GWBHS secretary. As the GWBHS is an all-volunteer organization, staff remains relatively limited.

The museum opens once a month, on every second Sunday, from 1-4 P.M. During this time, visitors can peruse the holdings in the exhibit rooms of the museum free of charge, but are not allowed in the basement area to view other artifacts. Additional services proved by the GWBHS include annual tours of Apple Island, as well as various other heritage and history events (including children’s events and an annual Family Fun Day) spread throughout the year.

The society’s mission, as indicated on the GWBHS web site, is “to celebrate and preserve the local heritage of the area, through its products, its technology and its people.” The area around Greater West Bloomfield was once the site of many apple orchards, hence the names “Orchard Lake,” and “Apple Island.” Apples and sheep farms thrived in the area in the 19th century, and settlers copied this apple growing tradition from the Native Americans who lived in the area. This long-time tradition of apple farming is preserved in some forms by the museum, which has many farming-related tools and even an apple cider press from the era.

With regard to this mission, the GWBHS does not turn down donations from the public, and collections are largely accumulated as donations. According to the standing rules of the society, the museum committee is responsible for deciding whether or not donations will be kept as a part of the collections. Primary artifacts housed at the museum include photographs, maps, clothes, tools, documents, books, and more that represent the history of the region. Artifacts range in composition from paper, wood, cloth, metal, and many other materials. In the main exhibition area, artifacts are kept on display and many are completely exposed to the public; easily touched or bumped into by patrons. Among the largest holdings of the museum are the region’s tax records, which are housed in the basement storage area of the building. The basement is notorious for water infiltration, which has been a problem area for the museum. In the basement area, artifacts rest alongside other non-historical materials such as cups and plates for museum events. The basement area stores everything that cannot fit in the exhibition area of the building, historic or non-historic. All other artifacts are kept in the museum office (photographs, books) and in glass displays on 6-12 month rotation at neighboring town halls.

**Preservation Planning and Administration**

**Preservation Goals:**

From what we have gathered in our interviews, the most pressing preservation goal of the GWBHS museum is finding new storage options for fragile historic records (such as the tax records) that are stored in the museum’s basement. While Buzz has stated the museum’s main goal is to educate the residents of Greater West Bloomfield of the history of the region using the artifacts it contains, the museum has also acknowledged a need consider preservation. This goal might be achieved with the help of a large donation from a deceased patron and area resident, which has left the museum with a little over $300,000. However, the Board of Directors must ratify all financial decisions before any money can be spent on storage options.

One of the main challenges for the organization, according to Bill McIsaac, is finding a building environment that is preservation friendly. The current state of the basement storage area leaves much to be desired in terms of the preservation environment. According to Buzz Brown, the original stone foundation has many narrow cracks and openings that permit seeping of some of the dampness from the earth around the foundation. This dampness, which can lead to mold growth and increased physical strain on the artifacts, is potentially disastrous for paper records that are stored in this environment.

**Policies:**

In terms of preservation policies, the GWBHS currently has no formal policies for the preservation of its artifacts. This is due to the extremely small size of the organization, as well as the all-volunteer staff. Most documents or artifacts that are deemed important are usually kept under glass (with no regular procedure), or are sheathed in some sort of protective covering such as plastic. Other artifacts are left out in the open, or are stored in the basement, with little to no protection. In fact, the organization regularly employs some of its artifacts, such as antique tools, as hands-on props for local history events held at the museum. The reasoning for this, according to Brown, is that the museum strives to provide an authentic introduction to the history of Greater West Bloomfield for its patrons. Also, the “children love it,” says Brown.

**Preservation Selection Criteria**:

There is no formal selection procedure for identifying objects that should be better preserved. The tools, as Bill has said, are generally considered less valuable in comparison to other items, and would not be among the first things he’d run after in an emergency situation. Generally, Buzz and Bill have noted items that have been earmarked as extremely important to the region. Some of these include an extensive set of tax records that are stored in the basement, as well as a land purchase agreement between the Native Americans in the area and the U.S. government.

The land purchase agreement is a linen-paper document, the size of a letter, stored in a small, unlocked glass case in the main exhibition room. Because the blinds remain open in this room, and temperatures (and humidity) fluctuate greatly, the document is vulnerable to lighting and climate-induced degradation. The document is hand-signed by former President John Quincy Adams, and is a priceless piece of history for the West Bloomfield area. It is easy to tell from a first look that ink is already fading, and the document is in need of immediate attention, perhaps conservation.

One last valuable artifact that GWBHS would like to see preserved, is a mural of a school child walking with her sheep, painted by local artist Roy Gamble. This artifact was cut from the wall of a school before its demolition, and may have special requirements for preservation depending on the exact composition of the substrate. These artifacts, though earmarked for preservation, have yet to be acted upon.

**Personnel**:

One of the greatest challenges to the organization that we have observed is the lack of staff. Currently, there are only two part-time trained museum staffers that are capable of enacting any preservation policies or procedures at the museum. This severely restricts the efforts of enacting a museum-wide plan. As staff is not compensated monetarily and must work other jobs to support themselves financially, a full-time commitment to the overhauling of the museum would be impossible without additional help. One suggestion that might help defray labor challenges would be to hire and train interns for the preservation project, who can learn how to help prepare the artifacts for long-term storage within the current building until a new facility or storage space can be procured.

**Disaster Preparedness:**

Additionally, there are no formal procedures in case of a disaster at the museum. From what we observed, there are no fire sprinklers, and no back-up storage options in case of an impending emergency. Some of the artifacts are protected from damage, while others are not. We have a series of recommendations on how to improve upon this, and those will be addressed at length within the *Building and the Environment* section of this paper.

**Funding**:

The museum is largely funded by private donations from local residents and visitors to the museum, but recently the museum has received a $300,000 bequest. Typically, the annual budget is around $20,000, which pays for basic heating and cooling, a small rent fee for the building, operating costs, and some events. With this $300,000 gift, the museum now has the option to purchase new storage space (if it can be found), or at least retrofit the building to better control the high relative humidity in the basement storage area. These funds should also be allocated to fire prevention systems and more pallets for storing artifacts off the basement floors.

To conclude this section, the GWBHS has no formal procedures for preservation of its artifacts. Our recommendations include implementing a plan for action (which should include equipping the current building with fire sprinklers - or moving into a new building entirely), hiring graduate student preservation interns that can help with the simple preservation tasks such properly buffering and preparing paper documents that are currently stored in filing cabinets alongside photographs, as well as starting a dialogue with the Board of Directors on where to allocate funds to provide a better storage space to house the museum’s artifacts.

**The Building and Environment**

As stated above, the GWBHS home is in the Orchard Lake’s old town hall, a building with a rich and dynamic history. The original foundation (dating back over 110 years) is still in place on the lower basement level, which serves as the storage for all of the artifacts and parts of the collection that are not currently on display. The more recent upper floor was built around 1950.

In discussing the positives and negatives of the current building and environment, we will address: the structure of the building as a whole, the upper floor, and the lower floor, highlighting some of the strengths, weaknesses, and pressing needs of the environment. We will make recommendations (some small and some large) that weave between all of those facets.

Something we are making sure to keep in mind is that the society does not own the building or property where it stands – it leases the facility through a third party and thus, cannot easily implement major structural changes. We’ve gathered that smaller, internal and self-initiated changes are preferred. Further, we understand that breaking our recommendations down into a timeline of high priority (1-2 years), medium priority (3-4), and low priority (5-10) would be most helpful. We will address the priority of recommendations here, and reiterate those of major overall importance in our final *recommendations for action* section at the end of this survey.

The most important step in extending the lifespan of documents in a preservation facility is the stable and reliable condition of the institution and its environment. GWBHS is fortunate to be located on valuable real estate and in close proximity to the new town hall, local schools, and residential neighborhoods. However, the age of the building means that it is also somewhat problematic for housing one-of-a-kind collections. We are concerned on a general level with the different needs that the exterior and each separate floor of the facility will require – especially when compounded with the diversity of documents and artifacts that exist within the collections. We understand that a new facility is not possible for GWBHS right now, or in the near future. We would encourage you to start thinking about moving, expanding, or renovating the building in the longer-term (and perhaps about allocating funds toward an eventual rebuild), but will focus on more practical and implementable solutions for now.

**General building maintenance**:

From our general surveying, we noted that there was normal wear and tear on the building. We were unable to survey the condition of the roof or drainage pipe system during our interviews, but will suggest that you take care to have those inspected annually. Annual inspections that evaluate the condition of the building’s siding, plumbing, and drainage systems would help you to understand where you’re at with managing its condition. The repercussions of something major, like a roof cave-in, will be very expensive - much more so than a bi-annual roof inspection will be now.

The basement floor presents the most drastic challenges for building maintenance because of its weathered condition. Its age, inordinate humidity, exposed pipes and plumbing, and different types of wall, floor, and ceiling constructions characterize it. Ensuring the space’s protection from mold and mildew is important so that expensive structural changes do not have to be very frequent. Good climate control and ventilation can do wonders to defray these issues, and we’ll talk about that in more depth in the sections on *temperature* and *relative humidity.*

Further, Buzz told us that the basement does not currently meet standards (the staircase being declared unfit for public use). Bringing the facility up to code by rebuilding that staircase, and adding any safety precautions that are necessary should be a high priority.

Even small things like keeping a bucket of supplies on hand to clean up messes immediately, or to temporarily defray the damage of a burst pipe or leaky faucet until it can be fixed, should all be things to think about.

**Environmental conditions and pollutants:**

We did not find any noticeable weed or plant overgrowth problems on the building’s exterior. However, the basement floor is very prone to pollutants and pests because of its damp condition and old foundation. It is dark, smells of mildew, and gets very little ventilation - even with fans. Bill mentioned that there had been a small ant problem this past summer, and that basic ant traps seemed to take care of the problem (the first instance he’d ever witnessed).

Because assessing the entire collection, item by item, would be a daunting task for the all-volunteer society if any disaster were to take place, *prevention* is the best solution we can prescribe to something like pests and pollutants. Once one pest gets in, it could affect the entire collection. So, as tedious as it may seem, having someone set up an appointment to get a pest control company to assess the fragility of the environment and decide how to abate the chance of such contaminants would be in the best interest of the society.

**Storage locations:**

Documents and artifacts are housed on both floors of the society. Most of the upper floor is open to the public, with the exception of the staff office – where two metal file cabinets house a variety of paper documents and the society’s photographic collections. A few over-sized and rare books are also stored horizontally above these filing cabinets. The conditions in the upper floor of the facility are preferable to those in the basement; however, filing cabinets can be problematic when they collect widely varying types of paper. We will talk about how to store and organize different types of paper in the section: *collections storage and use*.

The basement floor is designated as the main storage space. It houses diverse items: papers, manuscripts, deeds, hand scribed tax records, farming equipment, a whet stone, film reels, metal shelving, wooden shelving, and more. We observed that one half of the basement has tile flooring, and newer walls, while the other side has cement floors and exposed brick on three sides. The types of controls in the basement are, as GWBHS has willingly admitted, very unstable and inconsistent. Building off of the presence of ants, wildly fluctuating temperatures and humidity, and structural inconsistencies, we think that using the basement as a storage space is very dangerous.

We understand that some artifacts are more fragile than others, but caring for those disparate needs on an individual basis in this environment is an unbearable task for the small board of volunteer staff at GWBHS. One of the most pressing recommendations we can make in this survey is stressing the need to take the collections currently kept in the basement, and find a more ideal off-site storage space for them. The dangers otherwise can be extremely problematic, and you can read more about the specific preservation needs of different mediums at the *Northeast Document Conservation Center’s* website.[[1]](#footnote--1)

Bill relayed to us that he has actively sought out external storage spaces throughout the city, and looks for new possibilities all the time. He clearly articulated that off-site storage is definitely a priority, but they haven’t found a feasible option yet. We sympathize with this, but urge the rest of the board to aid him in finding new resources that could make this possible.

Off-site storage must be implemented in the short or medium term. Anything longer will equate to detrimental damage to many of the artifacts housed in the GWBHS basement. In the latter case, we would suggest thinking about donating any artifacts or documents that hold valuable cultural history to another repository that might have the means to preserve them for the long term.

**Temperature:**

In general, it is best to keep collections at low temperatures (under 70 degrees at all times). GWBHS, which is only open once per month, probably maintains a sub-70 degree temperature throughout most of the year. During summer months, however, it is likely that the average temperature rises quite a bit. While the ‘stay under 70’ marker is very important, it’s also equally important that the temperature stay *consistent*. There should not be 10-15 degree temperature swings from month to month. When that occurs, especially in conjunction with relative humidity (see section below), artifacts can swell and buckle, become warped, and start to grow mold, among a long series of other problems. Thus, climate control mechanisms like heating and air conditioning should be used to keep the temperature within a set range (ideally at 50-60 degrees Fahrenheit) throughout the year. Simple solutions like telling employees to wear an extra sweater when they’re volunteering, instead of turning the heat up past 70 degrees, will be very effective in mitigating climate control challenges.

Installing a basic and inexpensive climate control system to monitor the temperature of the facility is a good idea.[[2]](#footnote-0) A board member should be responsible for monitoring the climate conditions and taking written note of the temperature (at least weekly) by logging the values into a database or journal. The only way to evaluate how much the temperature needs to be adjusted is to see what the trends are for the building over time. This is a long-term investment that should be started now.

**Relative Humidity:**

Relative humidity is, more or less, how much moisture is in the air at a given time, compared to the amount of moisture the air can actually ‘hold’ at that temperature. When there is *more* moisture than the air can physically hold, dew and condensation occur, which translates to warped documents and books, mold, pests, etc. Most historical items survive longest when housed in low humidity (ideally: 30-55%). In our tour of the facility, we observed that there are already fans and a dehumidifier in the basement. These are great starts. The dehumidifier is key during the summer, and will do its part as long as someone remembers to empty the water-collecting bucket on a regular basis. However, the opposite usually becomes a problem in the winter: *dryness*. Using a humidifier to *add* moisture to the air can sometimes be a necessary precaution as well. Because the society does not currently have a climate control system in place, we are mostly guessing on the condition of the facility and the likely needs. The best way to assess the facts is to have the temperature and humidity data in front of you. To get this, you need a climate control system (same as mentioned in the ‘temperature’ section above), and should also have a board member be responsible for logging values on a weekly basis, so that trends, seasonal humidity fluctuations, or otherwise, can be accounted for.

**Light:**

It may sound surprising, but one thing that can be particularly dangerous to paper, books, manuscripts and the like is light. Sunlight’s UV rays can change the chemical structure of paper fibers and cause them to become fragile and discolored very quickly. Even artificial light can have this effect. Luckily, there are some things that GWBHS is already doing that will make it very easy and inexpensive to protect the collection against light damage.

We observed very different types of lighting throughout the building. The upper exhibit floor has mostly fluorescent tube bulbs held in ceiling panels. There is also an old neon light sign in the second exhibit room that is from a West Bloomfield movie theater. In the basement there are fluorescent lights again in tubes, but also recessed can lighting (without shield covers) shining directly on some parts of the collection from as little as a 1-2 foot distance.

Lower wattage and non-fluorescent light bulbs can help to defray the damage of light on the collections. This is especially important on the upper floor, where original photographs are in frames on the walls and are constantly subject to lights within the society, but also sunlight through the windows. Especially because GWBHS is only open one afternoon each month, we think it makes the most sense to block light during the non-use periods of the month rather than suggest purchasing new lights throughout the building. Purchasing thicker blinds for the windows, and remembering to keep them closed would prevent a lot of natural sunlight from hitting the artifacts and would make a big difference over time. You could open the blinds for the four hours you are showcasing the collection each month, and close them again until next time.

**Danger Preparedness**:

Since GWBHS is not open for the majority of the month, the ventilation, heat, light, humidity control, and regular cleaning are not accounted for during most of the year. This means that a major disaster such as a fire, flooding, a severe storm, or theft could cause damage to the building and artifacts, and may go unnoticed for any amount of time. Because GWBHS is volunteer-run, allotting inspection duties to each member of the board is probably unrealistic. Instead, introducing a plan for such events can get board members thinking about how to deal with such a situation if one ever comes up. GWBHS should make the creation, drafting, and implementation of disaster preparedness plans a high priority.[[3]](#footnote-1) This plan should specifically address fire, flooding, natural disaster, and security emergencies – three of which we will discuss a little further below:

*Fire detection and suppression:*
We noticed that GWBHS currently lacks fire alarm systems and extinguishers throughout the building.[[4]](#footnote-2) To start, we recommend talking with the local fire department about the vulnerabilities of the historical society. Letting them know which pieces of the collection are most valuable, and where the more fragile sides of the building are could help to quicken their emergency response if something ever were to happen.

In tandem with the plan suggested above, we recommend recording all disasters (big or small) that occur. Such a log should record the extent of damage, solutions applied, cost, dates, and any notes observed. In addition to dates of damage, it should include the dates of annual inspections, so that problems can be traced back to the last time they were checked, and conditions can be monitored over time. With a plan already in place, the level of shock will be lower should such a scenario play out, and the actions will already be decided upon, allowing solutions to be implemented much more quickly.

*Flooding:*
When it is necessary to put artifacts on the floor in the basement, they should always be kept on pallets in case of a water emergency. We noticed some pallets on the floor in the basement in our tour of the storage facility, but want to stress that these should *always* be used in *any* situation where documents cannot fit in off-ground storage space. As a medium priority recommendation, water detection systems can be purchased to help detect problems early on.

*Security:*
GWBHS is fortunate to be in close proximity to the city hall and police stations – two deterrents for thieves. Buzz told us that theft has never been a major issue or concern for the society, especially because the area is patrolled quite regularly. This is a great basic security framework. Because you seem to be very comfortable with this level of monitoring and have never had any issues, we would rather see you focus your attention and efforts on *in-house* security and other aspects of danger preparedness. By ‘in-house’ we mean something like: purchasing a large cage to lock rare books and fragile, valuable documents inside: a provision that involves little to no maintenance, but provides an additional buffer against potential theft.

**Overall:**

As an overarching recommendation for the immediate short-term, we think that GWBHS should form a small committee to be held responsible for reassessing the building maintenance protocols on a semi-regular basis. This team (after drafting and implementing a schedule for maintenance, a procedure for assessing the condition of the building, and hashing out a danger preparedness policy) should also look at the type of insurance covering the institution. How much are you paying? What does it cover? Will the current coverage take care of the types of disasters we mentioned in the paragraphs above? If not, the committee should re-evaluate the realities of the building structure (considering that it cannot be rebuilt or fixed overnight) and the type of policy needed to protect it.

**Collections Storage and Use**

**General Conditions:**

As mentioned in the building and environment section, storage methods vary widely for different museum objects. We’ve observed objects being stored in glass cases, on pedestals, behind or in front of other objects, in frames, behind glass, in poster holders, in wooden boxes, and some freely exposed without any protection. Some photographs sit behind glass on the tops of wooden tables. There are very few chairs or tables available for patron use. Paper files and books are stored in the office in filing cabinets and on shelves. The conditions also varied greatly. The tax records, stored in the basement, are subject to a much higher humidity and much lower light levels than the objects on the main floor.

**Handling:**

GWBHS has a philosophy that encourages patron interactivity and education. Different items allow for different levels of handling. On one end, the paper documents, photographs, and sensitive artifacts (i.e. cameras, prescription bottles) are usually never handled and are behind glass. At the other extreme, allowing for a high level of handling, are the hand tools, the dollhouse, the typewriter, the checking machine, and the whetstone.

*Staff and Users:*
Many of the items that allow for a higher level of handling are taken out of the museum for summertime events to be handled and used by patrons. Outside of these contexts, however, handling of museum objects is not encouraged.

There are no explicit rules about patrons or volunteers handling the museum artifacts on display. As a suggestion, we think that GWBHS should enforce a strict no food/no drink rule in the museum, displayed with signs and communicated through the volunteers. Food particulates can pose a threat to fragile documents just as pests or pollutants could. Patrons interested in working with documents should operate only in a clean and supervised environment. Further explicit instructions for individual displays should be posted near the artifacts in question.

Knowing how to handle the museum objects would be helpful for the volunteers. Of the staff members, Bill, the curator, interfaces with the items the most. We suggest identifying a few conferences that could provide Bill with more formalized training in preservation, and that would allow him to more easily create and maintain a policy for regulating both the needs of the collection and user interactivity with the artifacts. Bill could then pass along his training to the other volunteers, which should become a necessary part of the volunteer training process.

*Photo duplication:*
This is not a common request for the GWBHS, but Bill relayed to us that he often makes photocopies on most patron requests. Patrons do not have open access to photographic collections, so if they want an image of any kind, they have to go through a staff member. There is no formal procedure for requesting photocopies or content from GWBHS, and no set of policies on fulfilling those requests. We think that photocopying should be limited to items in very good condition, and that the museum owns exclusive rights to. If a photograph or document begins to show wear, there should be a process for putting that item under more stringent protections. As of now, there is no area available to create a “reading room” for documents or photographs.

*Circulation*:
Although we were told that other historical societies do not request materials from the GWBHS, the society does have small displays in the Keego Harbor and West Bloomfield Township offices. These displays do not allow for handling, but the utmost care should be taken on part of the GWBHS in transporting these museum objects. These off-site, circulating exhibitions will be discussed further in the section on *Exhibitions*.

**Major collections and considerations**:
We’d also like to recommend that the handling of artifacts should decrease as the amount of objects on display increases. Especially considering that GWBHS does not have a catalog of every item in the facility, it will be difficult to monitor the security of large amounts of content. Additionally, the display of more items usually correlates with a higher risk of accidental damage. Keeping that in mind, and making sure to have an organized exhibition presentation (especially important for valuable collections) is very important.

**Replacement and Reformatting**

**Replacement Scheduling:**

The GWBHS museum collection is entirely based on donations. If an item were to break, the society would attempt to repair it (depending on level of use/importance to collection), but replacement is not possible for most of the artifacts.

**Reformatting:**

There is an effort being undertaken by Bill to photocopy original copies of photographs in order to keep less sensitive versions on display. GWBHS does not have state of the art photocopying equipment, however, so Bill often does this outside of the museum. The paper used in the production of the copies appears to be of a high quality, however, the GWBHS should ensure that the photo paper that they use is of archival quality.

Microfilm, because it is not already in place at the institution, and would require purchasing equipment capable of displaying, capturing, and accessing the film, is not a practical option for GWHBS. It is also becoming an obsolete medium.

Bill wants to take GWBHS into a more digital space – where the collection can be available online (in the form of digital images, with descriptions) and easily accessible by patrons in the community and beyond. We agree that reformatting and digitizing the collection, is of tremendous importance. At the moment, Buzz controls an online database with the photograph collection. This collection is managed through the museum software *Past Perfect*, but in its current state, is relatively inaccessible unless a user is willing to dig deeply through the website. As an organization, they could digitally photograph and catalog the museum at the same time.

Access, above all else, was highly emphasized in our interviews, so digitization is the sensible next-step. In terms of digitization, the GWBHS should focus on creating high-quality image files that meet the international standard in file format. They should also begin a digitization effort with the artifacts that have the shortest expected life span, so as to save them in some format before their content disappears forever (of special concern is the 8 mm film ‘*Raging Bull’*)

**Exhibitions**

Currently, it is Bill, the Museum Collections Manager for GWBHS who is responsible for determining new ideas for exhibitions, researching and putting them together, and implementing them in exhibit spaces. In interviewing with him, we were able to get a good gauge on how often exhibits are rotated, how many exist within the community, and the scope and content they cover. From this interview and our observations, we will assess current practices and give recommendations where we think changes can both a.) make a difference, and b.) are implementable.

**Current practices, materials used, and policies:**

There are no current policies on exhibitions in place at GWBHS. There are no restrictions, processes, or clearances that volunteers have to go through to get the board to approve an exhibit proposal, to get access to items desired for the showcase, or anything further. Bill relayed that the only step in the development that might require approval, is the request for funding.

Still, exhibits get done, and fairly consistently. Bill says that he has a general underlying goal of producing 1-2 exhibits per year within the society itself. Additionally, there are 2-3 off-site exhibit cases that are filled on an annual (or sometimes bi-annual) basis.

*Off-site Exhibitions:*
We were very impressed and excited to hear that some of the collection materials leave the building and are viewable from other sites throughout the community (we were even able to see one of the 2-3 offsite display cases in the City Hall building!). Aside from these, Buzz and Bill told us that no other cross-institutional collection or exhibit sharing has gone on between the GWBHS and other cultural heritage institutions in the area.

Reaching out to other institutions to bring in some of their content, and showing it in a new light, might help to facilitate a relationship between GWBHS and another historical society, which could lead to additional shared resources and help with future frustrations. Before doing this, however, a policy on the requirements and limitations of loans to other repositories should be laid out (i.e. can they photocopy materials? How long can they borrow the collection for? What are the repercussions if the collection comes back in worse condition that it was lent in?).

Without a borrowing policy in place, off-site exhibitions could risk the well being of the collection. For example, off-site environments could potentially have environmental conditions that threaten the condition of the documents designed for exhibition there. Because it is a foreign environment, those items are being put in a location that potentially holds many more toxins, chemicals, sun exposure, temperature variations, or other problems. Settling on a policy and set of requirements for the environment of the borrowing institution is essential. GWBHS should be confident that its items would be well cared for while they are away, especially since off-site exhibits typically last between 6-12 months at a time.

*The User’s Experience:*
Bill keeps a logbook of the volunteers who come in on Sunday afternoon open-hours each month and tries to record their interests and contact information. However, no user feedback is currently solicited. Buzz stated that something as simple as printing off cards for suggestions or comments might be an easy and helpful addition to the collection, and we agree. That would be very easy and inexpensive. Even a small amount of feedback might help GWBHS learn more about its audience and the types of exhibits they would like to see.

*Permanent Exhibits - an approach:*
In the GWBHS museum, the upper floor is used as an exhibit space. Because it is limited in size, the current staff is actively trying to bring as much information into the public eye as possible. To call attention to some of the potential dangers that come with overcrowding an exhibition space, we address at least four things that should be kept in mind:

First, Buzz and Bill told us that there is no comprehensive catalog of the collection, nor are there individual accession numbers for any items. This is problematic. Without knowing what is there, it’s hard to be sure of what items are shown to the public at any given time, or even what condition they’re in. If it is impossible to assess the condition of the collection right now, there is no way to determine how much has change and possible decline has occurred in even the last 5-10 years. Right now, there is no way for GWBHS to quickly distinguish what items are losing their life-span the quickest, and therefore no measurement by which to respond to their needs.

Second, if a single person cannot currently keep track of, or look up information about a particular document, it is impossible to maintain intellectual control over the collection. If a user were to ask about the history of a particular item, it would be difficult for the GWBHS to relay the right information. Until standard collection descriptions are implemented, patrons have to rely on using their own means to locate the museum’s area-expert on any given topic.

Third, the vast majority of the collection consists of community donations. Because there is no extensive budget or widespread community effort to help the society appraise its artifacts, some of the collection could potentially be worthless, or represent very different stories and histories than what their original owners shared when donating them to the GWBHS. Taking caution in bringing new items into the collection (Bill estimated an average accession of about 10 items per year) can help to make more targeted exhibits that truly represent the history of the community, and fit well alongside the rest of the museum collections.

Fourth, overcrowding can be a problem for users. With overcrowding in exhibit rooms, it can be difficult for audiences to parse through or distinguish between different displays our groupings in any particular room. Further, when items themselves are already crowded, there is little to no room for written descriptions or contextual information to be added next to the items. This could eventually become a problem for the society itself: if all of the current volunteers were to move away or stop giving time to GWBHS, new volunteers would have to take over, and would be left with a collection void of description. Because GWBHS also lacks a comprehensive catalog, those volunteers would also know very little about the arrangement and history of the items chosen for exhibition.

**Overall:**

Being aware of the most valuable collection items (financially *and* culturally) is important, and caring for the housekeeping, cleanliness, and relevance of exhibits to the community will make them valuable to society at large. So far in our observations, the GWBHS seems to succeed in creating thoughtfully curated exhibits that lend well toward ‘area-expert’ volunteers who really ‘know their stuff’ on a particular aspect of the collection. Such people aren’t always easy to find, so we applaud the GWBHS on its dynamic, informed, and interested staff.

We should note that the suggestions made in the last sub-section (*Permanent exhibits - an approach*) are not necessarily criticisms or observations of GWBHS, but merely things to think about when moving forward. There are a lot of items in the exhibit room right now, and being aware of some of the dangers related to the overcrowding of collections might help with making informed decisions on what to display in the future.

**Digital Collections**

The GWBHS has a single set of historic photographs that were scanned by a local resident and gifted to the museum. These photographs are stored on the main office computer, and on an external hard drive kept by Buzz. The consistency and accuracy of metadata for these digital images is unknown. But this collection is not currently managed or considered in terms of its long-term preservation needs. Both Buzz and Bill have mentioned that they would like this collection to exist in some form online, and Bill stated a clear preference for everything in the museum to eventually be available online. “We have an Internet address that’s online 24/7 - that’s where we should be,” he told us.

Bill mentioned the potential utility in creating a “virtual tour" of the museum. As the GWBHS is only open to the public for a few hours each month, it could be an enormous asset for local schools in their teaching of local history. An enormous benefit to digitization, aside from access, is having a documented, catalogued collection. We’ve mentioned our concern for the general and inconsistent description of records and what they contain, but the creation of a digital collection and virtual tour would be enormous opportunities to rectify the current situation and leave a valuable visual record of the museum’s current state.

The majority of the items in the collection date to before 1900, eliminating copyright as an obstacle in the digitization effort. According to Bill, just about everything already passed into the public domain. It is important to be wary of items that might teeter the line between being in or out of copyright, and making sure that GWBHS has exclusive rights to that artifact before sharing it in an online repository.

We recommend hiring non-paid graduate student interns during summer months or during the school year, who have reasonable experience and can begin digitizing collections. Buzz and Bill should work closely with the interns to develop effective metadata tagging standards for the collection. Currently, scans of museum materials are made on an all-in-one home office printer, which does not meet standards for long-term preservation. An additional recommendation, then, is to invest in better scanning hardware and software to ensure the best possible digital transfer of museum materials.

**Conservation**

The Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society has no conservation policies or special off-site facilities used to care for damaged or brittle documents and artifacts. However, the GWBHS can implement some form of conservation procedure without erecting a new building. Some possible suggestions include: training selected board members in conservation practices, finding an outside vendor aiding in conservation, or donating items that cannot be cared for to facilities that have the means to do so.

**Recommendations for Action**

**Summary of Preservation Needs and Goals:**
In summation, the current environment at the GWBHS building is not conducive to long-term storage needs due to the inability to properly regulate building climate and protect against possible disaster. Additionally the GWBHS lacks personnel trained in managing a long-term preservation environment. There are many valuable artifacts that have been deemed a priority for preservation, but action must be taken quickly to ensure their long-term survival.

**Short-Term Priorities:**
An inexpensive and effective investment would be the purchase of alkaline-buffered file folders for organizing the photographs and paper documents that are currently kept in the filing cabinets in the staff office on the building’s main floor. Photographs and other types of paper should not be housed together, because a single acidic document spreads acid to those around it, making the environment a haven for degradation. Alkaline folders are made to have a *basic* pH that counteracts the potential existence of acid, and are a stronger protection for GWBHS’s paper collections. As an aside, it is important to store a maximum of 12 documents within each folder, and similar items should be kept together if possible. We also suggest getting rid of the file cabinets currently being used, and replacing them with non-wood shelving and archival boxes.

Heavy blinds should be purchased and installed on the windows to greatly reduce the amount of light damage to the artifacts in the main exhibit room. The staircase leading to the basement should be fixed and up to code. Purchasing a PEM2 Datalogger or another temperature monitoring device will allow the GWBHS to track short- and long-term environmental trends and adjust accordingly for effective preservation.

The museum needs to form policies and regulations on (including, but not limited to) preservation, disaster preparedness, regular building maintenance, patron handling of artifacts, and digitization. Every staff volunteer member needs to be trained on those policies, and they should be enforced at all times. If at any time policies seem to hinder the mission of GWBHS, they should be re-evaluated at board meetings and appropriate changes should be made.

Another strategy the GWBHS can employ is to start recruiting students and interns to catalog the museum’s holdings. The GWBHS can also talk with the police station and fire department and communicate the museum’s specific needs. Lastly, off-site storage should be an *immediate* concern for the historical society: the conditions in the basement are not conducive to preservation. Finding another location that can temporarily store sensitive records and museum objects not on display is of paramount importance.

**Medium-Term Priorities:**
If off-site storage cannot be located within the short-term, GWBHS should invest in a water alert system for the basement within the medium-term. A moisture alert system in combination with an action plan in case of flooding (especially important due to the society’s proximity to a body of water) can prevent the loss of historical records. GWBHS should also plan to begin a digitization effort within the medium-term: this means earlier research on where a high-quality scanner can be rented or borrowed from. Rather than purchasing such expensive equipment (which will quickly become obsolete) renting or borrowing will allow the GWBHS to digitize without spending too much money on a device that will rarely be used after the entire collection is digitized. Web content should also be updated and standardized to appear uniform.

**Long-Term Priorities:**
The GWBHS museum facility is not an ideal preservation environment for the types of historical documents and objects collected by the institution. A significant renovation that involves waterproofing the basement storage should be enacted, or the museum should move to another building altogether to establish a proper environment for long-term storage. Along with the digitization effort, the proper migration of file formats to changing standards should be attended to. Digital files should be reformatted at regular intervals to ensure compliance with the systems that read and decode them.

**Other Considerations:**
A few very sensitive documents, like an historian should consider the tax records, the 8 mm film, and the land purchase agreement for appraisal.  If the storage conditions for these documents do not improve in the short-term, transferring them to another archive or institution that has the resources to better preserve them should be considered. Additionally, to cover costs that go beyond these recommendations, and to keep a sustainable financial model in light of these preservation recommendations, the museum should actively seek out other means of funding. This can include applying for grants, partnering with other non-profits to hold fundraiser events, or simply investing in a more prominent donations bin for the museum. Although the overall preservation assessment will involve considerable resource allotment, labor, and pre-planning, GWBHS exists to create a dialogue for the members of its community between the present and the past. Starting with short-term priority recommendations can help to ensure that those stories and pieces of history within the GWBHS will still be there for many years to come.

*Note of Thanks:*
*We would like to thank the GWBHS, and specifically its board members Bill McIsaac and Buzz Brown for offering their time, knowledge, open-mindedness, and love of local history to the three of us for the extent of this survey assessment. We hope that we have delivered a report that can greatly help with the preservation of many of the amazing and fascinating pieces of history that we’ve been fortunate to learn about thus far.*

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4. National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) 909. Code for the Protection of Cultural Resource Properties - Museums, Libraries, and Places of Worship, (2010 ed.).(http://www.nfpa.org/aboutthecodes/aboutthecodes.asp?docnum=909)
5. Northeast Document Conservation Center. Preservation Leaflets. website: <http://www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets.list.php>
1. The NEDCC is a rich source of information (broken down into leaflets) on many aspects of preservation. We recommend the pamphlets on the environment, disaster preparedness, and storage. <http://www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets.list.php> [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. We suggest the PEM2 Datalogger. It is an affordable climate tracking system that can easily be installed and used to log temperature and relative humidity throughout the year. You can learn more at this website: <https://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/store/environmental-monitoring/pem2-datalogger> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Michigan State University’s website (*Matrix*) on Disaster Mitigation Services (<http://www.matrix.msu.edu/~disaster/>), and the *Michigan Alliance for the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* (MACCH) website (<http://www.macch.org/?page_id=10>) should be able to help you get started on drafting an Emergency Preparedness Plan. Refer back to the NEDCC’s “Worksheet for Outlining a Disaster Plan” too. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. An excellent guide on protecting cultural resources against fire can be purchased from the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA). http://www.nfpa.org/aboutthecodes/aboutthecodes.asp?docnum=909 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)